

EPA Plans Environmental Research For Initiative on Protecting Seniors

The Environmental Protection Agency's new Aging Initiative will focus on research into how environmental pollutants affect the elderly, as well as how the aging population will impact the environment.

EPA is no stranger to research about the elderly. For example, it has done extensive research on the health effects of particulate matter, Administrator Christie Whitman told *ARTN*. "Particulate matter found in the air we breathe is responsible for tens of thousands of premature deaths each year of older persons who suffer from respiratory diseases such as asthma or chronic bronchitis."

However, EPA's Aging Initiative will allow the agency to coordinate and develop a more comprehensive research agenda. It seeks input from public health professionals, health care providers, schools of public health, aging groups and seniors to develop a national agenda on the environment and aging.

EPA will identify environmental hazards in homes (household cleaning products, pesticides and indoor air pollutants) and communities (high ozone levels) and recommend steps to prevent or reduce exposure to these hazards.

Whitman said some of the pollutants that will likely emerge as environmental threats to older persons include microorganisms in water (*E. coli* and cryptosporidium); indoor air pollutants (radon, second-hand smoke and carbon monoxide); outdoor air pollutants (ozone and particulate matter, pesticides, volatile organic compounds); and neurotoxins (lead and mercury).

EPA's environmental health message will encourage seniors to reduce hazards in their communities or take precautions to avoid them. Examples include staying indoors or limiting outdoor activity on ozone alert days, minimizing exposure to asthma triggers such as second-hand smoke by making households smoke-free, and reducing household dust and mold.

"We will also study the impact an aging population will have on the ecosystem," Whitman said, including community land use decisions and ecological resources.

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